

# First record of Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata* for Seychelles

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Première mention de l'Alouette monticole *Melanocorypha bimaculata* pour les Seychelles. Une Alouette monticole *Melanocorypha bimaculata* était présente à Bird Island du 22 au 27 novembre 2003. Cette mention, qui a été acceptée par le Comité d'Homologation Seychellois comme la première pour le pays, semble également constituer la première donnée d'un oiseau d'origine sauvage au sud de l'équateur.

From 20 to 24 November 2003 we visited Bird Island (03°43'S 55°13'E), the northernmost of the Seychelles, which is gaining a reputation as a good site for migrant and vagrant birds. The island lived up to expectations, as within 24 hours of arriving we had seen a number of Palearctic–African migrants, including a Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*, five Amur Falcons *Falco amurensis*, c.20 Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica*, two White Wagtails *Motacilla alba* and a Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*.

On 22 November at c.12.00 hrs we were watching a Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* in an area of sandy scrub in the north of the island, when a large lark alighted at close range and commenced feeding. We spent the next ten minutes watching it through binoculars, before hurrying to the hotel to make notes and collect a telescope. Subsequently we had excellent views for nearly an hour. The bird was very tame and fed continuously. The heavy bill, conspicuous black patch extending across the breast, and dark underwing, pointed to Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*, Calandra Lark *M. calandra* or possibly an African species with which we were unfamiliar. Although the range of field guides available to us was rather limited, we concluded that the wing and tail pattern indicated Bimaculated Lark rather than Calandra.

On 23 November the bird was also seen by Robbie Bresson, a local birdwatcher, and it was still present on 24th, when we returned to Mahé. Here, we consulted a range of field guides and other literature, and were able to confirm the identification as Bimaculated Lark. We returned to Bird Island with Adrian Skerrett on 27th and found the bird still present in the same area.

However, it was much less tame, to the extent that AS was unable to photograph it. We could not find it on 28th, and it was not seen subsequently.

## Description

A large, attractive and brightly plumaged lark, with distinct chestnut tones to the face and bright orangey-buff tips to the greater coverts. Head markings rather complex, with a broad and conspicuous whitish supercilium, a blackish loreal stripe, and a dark line extending back from the base of the lower mandible outlining a creamy-white lower eye-ring. Ear-coverts rather plain chestnut, surrounded by thin dark lines. Heavy black breast-band broadest on upper-breast-sides. Rectrices tipped white, except central pair. No white trailing edge to the wing in flight. Underwing dark grey rather than blackish.

Although geographical variation between Bimaculated Lark populations is slight and sometimes considered insufficient to warrant subspecific separation (e.g. Alström 2004), three races are usually accepted. In view of the bright plumage tones, we tentatively concluded that the bird was of the race *rufescens*, which breeds in central and southern Turkey, northern Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, rather than the greyer nominate race from northern Turkey and southern Transcaucasia (Cramp 1988, Snow & Perrins 1998). A third race, *torquata*, in north-east Iran and Turkmeniya eastwards, is even paler and greyer than the nominate, and winters in Iran, Pakistan and India (Cramp 1988). Birds of the two western races migrate through Egypt to winter mainly in Sudan and Eritrea (Urban & Brown 1971, Moreau 1972, Nikolaus 1987, Goodman & Meininger 1989, Keith *et al.* 1992).

The record has been accepted by the Seychelles Bird Records Committee as the first for Seychelles. It would also appear to be the first south of the equator, a specimen from Swakopmund, Namibia, collected on 26 September 1930, being considered to refer to an escaped cagebird (Brooke 1988).

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